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State Dept. Eyes Its Own For Leaks

By Jeremiah O'Leary
Washington Star Staff Writer

The State Department today is in the position of appearing to be investigating some of its own highest officials, including Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger, about just what information they provided for a controversial article on Mideast diplomacy.

If any department official gave the author, Edward R.F. Sheehan, any of the documents known as "Memcons" — memorandums of conversations — the department spokesman, Robert L. Funseth said, "this was unauthorized, a serious error of judgment, and disciplinary action will be taken."

The question is who gave Sheehan what. As one department insider said caustically, "There are only four officials in the department with enough muscle to have given Sheehan the kind of 'memcons' he printed. Sisco, Atherton, Saunders and Kissinger. Do you think anybody is going to discipline them?"

THE OFFICIALS he referred to, other than Kissinger, are Joseph Sisco, undersecretary for political affairs; Alfred Atherton, assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, and Harold Saunders, now director of intelligence and research but a top Middle East expert for the other three during the 1973 war and its aftermath.

There is no question that Sheehan was briefed at the State Department's highest level before writing his explosive article in Foreign Policy magazine. He talked with 60 sources on three continents, including Kissinger and the secretary's top Mideast experts, Kissinger's press spokesman acknowledged.

What is not clear is whether any of these sources gave Sheehan memcons that President Ford and other U.S. officials had with Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and other Arab leaders.

It is also unclear whether Sheehan got such memcons with the promise not to use them in the precise form in which they are written. Sheehan contended that the conversations reported were "verbatim"

THE DENIAL by the State Department that Sheehan's version of the conversations were verbatim is hair-splitting. "Memcons" are not transcripts; they are memos describing important conversations and they are the work of second-level officials who take notes and write down the substance of the conversations from these notes. But a "memcon" is close enough to the actual conversation that it has the impact of a stenographic transcript.

What is important is that the conversations took place, and no official has denied the authenticity or substance of them as reported by Sheehan.

It is really a question of whether Sheehan violated ground rules about the discussions he had with State Department officials and whether they gave him documents to take with him under certain conditions of attribution.

The department arranged Sheehan's interviews, but says it did it on a background basis, meaning that the information was not supposed to be quoted or attributed. Funseth also said that Kissinger himself met with Sheehan for one or two brief sessions.

THE ARTICLE purports to quote Ford as telling Sadat that the U.S. objective in the Mideast was an Israeli withdrawal to its 1967 borders. The disclosure caused a furor in Israel and a certain amount of glee in Egypt.

But the real pinch now is for Kissinger and his aides. They often berate others for leaking important information to the papers, and the Foreign Policy article has every earmark of being an in-house State Department leak.